

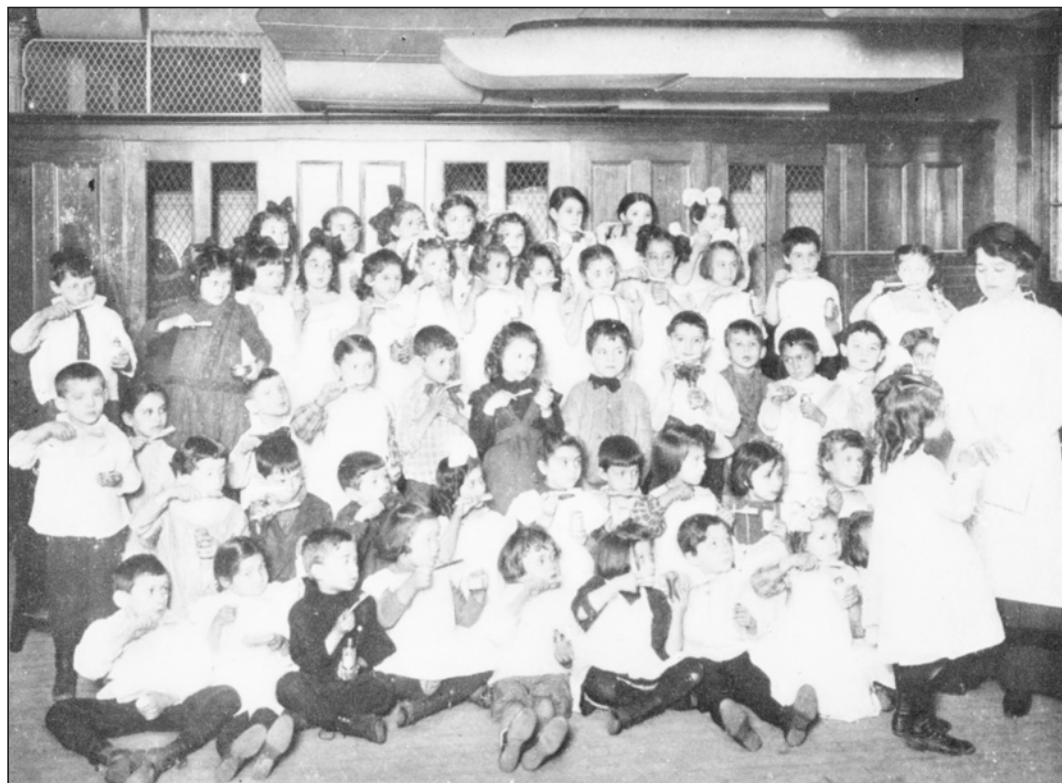
# Popularizing the Toothbrush

Elizabeth Fee and Theodore M. Brown

## TOOTH DECAY IN EUROPE

and America is believed to have increased dramatically during the 19th century as a result of the growing general availability of refined flour and sugar in industrially processed foods. By the end of the century, surveys showed that between 90% and 95% of all children had untreated decaying teeth.<sup>1</sup> Most children saw a dentist—if at all—only for emergency extractions. In 1910, local dentists examined 447 schoolchildren in Elmira, NY, and reported that only 22 of the children had teeth “in perfect condition.”<sup>2</sup> The other children collectively had 2063 cavities and 617 “teeth and roots needing extraction.” Similar results were being reported from other towns and cities.

Between 1910 and 1916, philanthropists built and endowed the first free and reduced-fee clinics for children and established the first schools for dental hygienists in Rochester, NY, Bridgeport, Conn, and Boston, Mass. By the 1920s, almost all American cities had free or reduced-fee clinics, and by 1950, such clinics were providing almost half of all oral health services delivered to children. Members of local dental associations staffed some clinics on a volunteer basis together with young dental school graduates seeking clinical experience. During the Great Depression, federal funds helped local and state governments to hire unemployed dentists.



**“Here we are coming to clean our teeth, clean our teeth, clean our teeth/ Here we are coming to clean our teeth; and we do it night and morning.” *Toothbrush Drill in New York City*, photographer unknown, circa 1912–1913.**

**Source.** Prints and Photographs Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Md.

The first dental hygienists entered the schools to clean children’s teeth and teach them how to use toothbrushes.<sup>3</sup> Some cities provided each child with a free toothbrush and tooth powder, while others sold them at 2 or 3 cents each. As in England, where toothbrushes were provided to all servicemen during World War I, this helped establish and extend the use of the toothbrush in working-class families.<sup>4</sup> American schools also adopted the “toothbrush clubs” and “toothbrush drills” begun in England.<sup>5</sup> This

image, from a New York school, shows children demonstrating their newly acquired skills of toothbrushing. ■

## About the Authors

Elizabeth Fee is with the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md. Theodore M. Brown is with the Departments of History and of Community and Preventive Medicine at the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Elizabeth Fee, PhD, Bldg 38, Room 1E21, 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 (e-mail: elizabeth\_fee@nlm.nih.gov).

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